



City of Yonkers

Mayor Philip A. Amicone

2011 State of the City Address

February 23, 2011



yonkers **NY.GOV**

Good evening.

Mr. Council President.

Members of the City Council.

Honorable judges and distinguished guests.

As you know, this is my final opportunity to address you as mayor in this special setting, where all of city government and many of our residents come together to join in a conversation about the state of our city.

A conversation about who we are, who we want to be, and how we get there.

And it's my hope tonight that we can come together, not as Republicans or Democrats, not as east-siders or west-siders, not as members of one union or another, and not as councilmembers or mayor.

My hope is that, instead, we can come together tonight under the one umbrella that unites us all --- that tonight we come together as the people of Yonkers, as residents and stakeholders of this fine city.

...Because we have some serious things to talk about.

We'll start tonight, the only way we can start: by examining the city's finances and how we are dealing with the worst economy in most of our lifetimes.

CITY BUDGET & FISCAL REFORMS

We all know the world has changed. But what you might not know is how, specifically, the deteriorating economic conditions of the past few years have affected city government. ...And they have in every conceivable way.

The sobering reality is that, for the foreseeable future, Yonkers will be dealing with economic conditions that demand continued austerity and sacrifice.

Here are the hard facts we face.

Projected Budget Deficit

As most of you know all too well, the economic recovery that folks in Washington tell us is under way is happening at a painfully slow rate. That means we cannot count on local revenues to increase anytime soon.

On the state funding front, the picture is much more bleak. Once again, the governor's proposed budget slashes municipal and education funding for Yonkers this year.

When you put it all together, we are facing a \$32 million budget deficit in the upcoming municipal budget, and a \$64 million deficit for the Board of Education.

That's more than \$96 million we will have to cut in order to balance the budget --- and that's on top of the cuts we made last year and the year before.

\$96 million is a big number. In the short term, the only ways to close a gap this big are increasing our revenues, which means raising taxes, or cutting expenses even further, and that means additional cost-cutting and more layoffs.

So there will be more tough decisions in the months ahead as the City Council and I begin our work on next year's budget. I wish there were another way but there is not.

Looking more long term, there are some solutions but they will require us to think differently. We need a cooperative effort between state and local governments to attack some of the contributing causes of our financial hardships on multiple fronts. And none of these solutions will be easy because we've already implemented all the quick fixes --- all the low-hanging fruit has been picked.

The only thing left to do is tackle the age-old problems that have traditionally been the third rails of government --- the issues no one touches for fear of political consequence.

Downsizing City Workforce & Consolidating Services

It's time for all of us to embrace --- not just acknowledge --- but embrace an elementary truth. It's a truth our taxpayers already know, but one that many in the public sector and among the special interests have become blind to.

The fact is, much of the way our government operates was developed from an entirely different set of circumstances in a starkly different era.

Things are different now. Just ask those who are out of work.

Like American companies that have had to reinvent themselves to become more competitive in today's economy, government too must change. It is not an option.

We must get smaller, smarter, more creative.

And here's how...

We have started where any family facing less income would start. We have cut expenses. And we haven't cut them a little; we've cut them a lot.

For the first time since the first control board thirty years ago, the budget I proposed and the City Council adopted last year was smaller than the previous year, by almost \$10 million.

And next year we will again spend less than this year.

And because nearly 80% of our expenses are labor --- the people who provide city services: police officers and building inspectors, clerks and sanitation workers, firefighters and teachers and everyone else --- that means that cutting our budget and reducing our spending will result in fewer jobs through either attrition or layoffs.

Over the past ten years, our workforce has shrunk nearly 10%.

We have the smallest city workforce since 1997, almost 250 fewer positions than when I took office more than seven years ago. But at the same time, Yonkers' population continues to grow, as we expect the new census data will show. So the challenge we face in constructing a new era of smaller, smarter government is meeting an ever increasing demand for services while at the same time the money to pay for those services is dwindling.

There are only two ways we can and must meet this challenge.

One, we have to figure out smarter, more efficient ways of providing the services you need and are entitled to. And two, we have to reduce the cost of those services: transforming city government by modernizing it, making it smarter, more efficient, oriented around customer service, and geared toward saving taxpayer money.

We'll begin with the first point. For several years, we've been promoting the idea of consolidating services between municipal government and the school district.

We have already done a lot in the way of workforce reductions, as I mentioned earlier. A 10% reduction is significant for any organization, public or private. Unfortunately though, that's not enough. The current budget climate will force us to downsize even further.

For several years we've been promoting the idea of consolidating government services between the city and school district. But, as with any type of structural change, there are many complications. And with consolidation of services, most of those complications stem from cumbersome state labor laws that prevent us from moving quickly to downsize.

But this year we will finally make some progress on combining services. The Board of Trustees has now authorized the superintendent of schools to proceed with a plan to combine financial, procurement and personnel services between the city and the school district. And we will do our best to overcome the obstacles that arise and move forward with a plan that will save taxpayer money by reducing overhead and duplicated services.

Reforming New York State's Pension System

But we also have to reduce the costs of providing public services, and that means reexamining our labor structure and contracts because they're too expensive. Some of the causes of our high labor costs are obvious. Others require more thought.

The most obvious cost strain is the New York State public pension system. While most public pensions are reasonable and fair, there are some public employees earning pensions that are substantially higher than their base salaries at the end of their careers, and way out of line with almost anything in the private sector. This is absurd and it's unacceptable to our taxpayers.

The system became this way over many years because, for a long time, New York State could pay for it. But those times are over.

Of course our public servants deserve a safe and secure retirement. But we have reached the point that the only way to protect pensions for public employees is to reform the system so that it will be there when they need it.

The best way to accomplish this is for the State Legislature to end the practice of adding overtime pay into retirees' pensions. Last month, I traveled to Albany to press this and other reform ideas before our state leaders. And now it's time for them to act on this issue that is threatening to bankrupt ours and all local governments across New York State.

But we are going to hold up our end of the bargain too. From this point on, reducing pension costs must be a part of any collective bargaining process my or any new administration undertakes. There is no choice if we are to survive financially.

It's time for everyone to realize that no new labor contracts can be signed with salary increases unless they are accompanied by reforms to benefit packages that produce real savings.

Fixing New York State's Education Funding Formula

Now, cost restructuring and a new labor structure are only part of the long term solution. Any discussion of Yonkers' finances over the past thirty years has invariably included the topic of state education funding. And how could it not?

The call to reform New York State's education funding formula is a familiar theme I have highlighted in each and every state of the city address. We have shown beyond any reasonable doubt how, for more than three decades, a flawed formula that treats Yonkers like a wealthy community has shortchanged our city's schools out of tens of millions of dollars a year and forced Yonkers homeowners to pay higher property taxes to make up the difference.

Even the governor and leaders from both parties in the legislature have agreed that this formula needs to be changed. But even though we have won the argument, our state leaders have yet to fix it.

In fact, we're going to lose school funding this year because the governor has already proposed cutting Yonkers school funding by close to \$18 million, on top of the \$22 million cut we suffered last year --- all of which is dictated by the same seriously flawed formula.

New York State's own budget deficit is not an acceptable excuse not to fix the formula. As I've said, we in Yonkers don't mind sacrificing along with everyone else while we try and get New York State back on the right track. What we do mind is when we have to sacrifice disproportionately, as we have done for decades.

We should all be familiar with the facts about education funding by now, and they have never been disputed. This year, in the proposed budget, New York State will pay \$17,000 to educate each student in the Buffalo school district. It will pay \$14,000 per student in Syracuse and Rochester. In Yonkers, New York State pays just a little more than \$8,000 to educate each of our children while at the same time our taxpayers pay more per pupil than any other city.

We are forced to live with a state funding formula that says Yonkers children are worth \$7,000 less on average than children in New York's other big cities.

The bottom line is that Yonkers taxpayers are paying more than their fair share into the state's education system. New York State must do more for Yonkers when it comes to funding education. Our students deserve it!

Last week Governor Cuomo introduced two new proposals to reward achievement instead of spending good money after bad on failing school districts around the state. His first proposal will reward the highest achieving school districts with more school funding to spur further academic improvements. And the second will provide more funding to school districts that reduce bureaucratic waste. We support both of these measures in concept because rewarding districts for achievement can only be good for Yonkers. So not only will we apply for these grant monies, but with even more academic gains and our consolidation measures, we will win them too.

Competition among school districts will give our students a chance to earn the kind of financial support from state government they should have been getting all along. And we know they'll succeed because they already have.

It's high time for state leaders in Albany to recognize the advances made by the Yonkers Public Schools by rewarding them with funding that acknowledges their progress.

REBUILDING YONKERS

Albany also needs to acknowledge that we are doing our part locally to ensure Yonkers' financial future and long term sustainability. For eight years, this has been the core focus of my administration. In a single statement, here is our mission...

We are striving to create a sustainable economy that employs Yonkers residents and pays for essential services while at the same time enriching our quality of life.

That's it. Every day I come to work with that core focus.

It's a mission that has driven my administration.

A philosophy that will enable our city to prosper.

A principle that gives our government purpose.

Ambitious Redevelopment Citywide

As I've said many times, you don't dig your way out of a hole; you have to build your way out. So we made a commitment to grow our economy on a grand scale --- to make Yonkers a thriving, self-sustaining, destination city.

To accomplish this, we forged a bold and comprehensive development plan that was broader and more ambitious than anything our city has ever seen --- more than \$5 billion of new and planned development that is transforming our city for the better forever.

So far, our downtown and waterfront have seen the most dramatic transformation. This is not by accident. Yonkers is participating vigorously in what is one of the most sweeping transformations of urban planning in American history. All across America, from Baltimore to Chicago; from St. Louis back to New York City; older industrial waterfront properties that no longer serve a useful purpose in today's economy are being transformed into modern, sustainable developments with a focus on smart density and mass transit. Not only is this smart planning, it makes good financial sense for investors and developers too.

Up and down the Hudson River we are reclaiming Yonkers' waterfront after decades of decline and disuse, and investing millions of dollars to build and expand parks and create jobs. A few years ago we completed the first phase of a new waterfront esplanade that is giving the waterfront back to you the people. Around it, we constructed a modern, mass-transit oriented residential development called Hudson Park, which has doubled its size in the last three years and has brought new residents and taxpayers into our city.

And last year we drafted and approved a new master plan for the Alexander Street corridor. For those who don't know, this thin, mile-long strip of industrial land between the Metro-North tracks and the Hudson River presents a unique opportunity for smart growth and job creation. Currently, the properties along Alexander Street serve few useful purposes for the people of Yonkers and collectively produce very little in taxes.

However, the new master plan, which was drafted with extensive public input, calls for millions of new square feet of residential and commercial space and will continue our waterfront's transformation, similar to what has happened in Hoboken and Jersey City. Alexander Street is ready for new investors to come in and build. We know it will take time. Transformations like this take years to materialize. And of course it will take money. We have to find banks and investors willing to build here. But these aren't pipe dreams. When the economy eventually frees up money for new investments, Yonkers will be more ready than any place else to capitalize on that investment because of the great asset we have in our physical location, and because the hard work and planning are already done. I want to thank our Community Development Agency for accomplishing this huge planning initiative in a reasonable amount of time --- just a little more than a year. It's a great example of how government can work quickly and efficiently to accomplish a goal.

I think it's also important to mention that we are not rebuilding Yonkers by ourselves. We have struck many partnerships, public and private, that are helping us expand and revitalize almost every part of our city. One of these partnerships is happening at the Hudson River Museum. There, we are working with the museum and Westchester County to construct a brand new \$3 million amphitheater that continues Yonkers' proud commitment to its arts and cultural organizations.

Another partnership with the county is our expansion of the Old Croton Aqueduct Pathway. This important parks project is made possible by the addition of 15 new acres of parkland that we dedicated three years ago, and the commitment of capital monies by Westchester County. I want to thank County Executive Rob Astorino and our county legislators who are here tonight for these important investments in Yonkers.

We have also improved public housing in Yonkers. Along Ashburton Avenue, we tore down one of the oldest and most blighted public housing developments in the nation in Mulford Gardens. We are replacing it with brand new, quality market-rate and affordable housing, constructed to blend in with the neighborhood instead of separating from it. The first two buildings are already open and fully occupied with more on the way.

And the neighborhoods around Ravine Avenue, Nodine Hill and South Broadway also have newly drafted master plans in various stages of approval that call for similar improvements. And next month a new master plan and rezoning ordinance for the downtown will go to the City Council. All of these planning efforts are designed so that new businesses and developers who want to invest in Yonkers can gain speedy approvals, as long as they conform to the city's goals and the community's standards.

The east side of our city has also seen a resurgence of economic activity. After several decades of decline, Yonkers Raceway has once again become one of the most important economic engines in our region with the hugely successful Empire City, that now boasts well over a hundred thousand admissions every week. And the Cross County Shopping Center has nearly completed its own \$300 million renovation, and has added more than 500 new jobs since 2005.

In northwest Yonkers we opened the first new hotels in our city in more than 40 years, and both are doing very well. A state-of-the-art veterinary clinic began operating at Executive Park two years ago and is now the largest facility of its kind in the region. And one of the proudest additions to Yonkers is the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, the former New York Foundling Hospital in Brooklyn, which will be open next year.

The Lessons of Delay & Inaction

Together we have begun an economic revitalization that has taken root in every corner of our city, and we should be proud of that. But there have been some disappointments along the way.

After many long years of planning and political wrangling, Ridge Hill Village, the largest and most important development project to date in our city's history, will finally open its doors this year.

Now it's no secret to anyone that I have made economic development the centerpiece of my administration, and that has meant that, since the beginning, I have been Ridge Hill's most ardent supporter. I pushed our planning agencies and City Council for years to approve Ridge Hill in a timely manner so it could begin producing the jobs and revenue our city desperately needs. We even fought through a series of lawsuits to get this project under way. Throughout the long and tedious debate, many things were said. But no one --- not a single person --- ever disputed the most important fact about this crucial project: that it will bring thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new taxes to our city --- revenue that we need to keep our city and school district running.

Granted, there were important issues that needed to be worked out during the approval process, but nothing so complex that we couldn't have worked out our differences over the course of a year or so. Instead, we became entangled in a five-year saga that cost our city tens of millions of dollars in lost revenues, lost jobs and wasted time and opportunity that we will never get back. In fact, these delays are costing us some \$2 million every month that Ridge Hill is not open.

Now, nine years after Ridge Hill was proposed to the City Council, after years of exhaustive public and legal wrangling, we will end up with a project that is almost identical to what was originally proposed.

Ridge Hill is going to open, but it will open on the tail end of a bad recession instead of three years ago when it really could have made a difference in the economics of this city.

Sadly though, the Ridge Hill project was not enough to teach us the baneful consequences of delay and inaction. As the Ridge Hill project entered the third year of debate over its approval, another group of investors approached the city with an idea so remarkable it made news all over the country. A team of three nationally known and successful development firms wanted to spend more than a billion and a half dollars to remake downtown Yonkers and help us further develop our waterfront.

The Struever Fidelco Cappelli project, what we now call SFC, called for revitalizing more than 450 acres of our city. The first phase alone will bring retail, residential and entertainment venues including a minor league ballpark to the Chicken Island Parking lot, which has been a vacant eyesore in the middle of our downtown for most of my life. The next phase will see iconic new residential towers erected on the Hudson River along with the addition of new public parkland. And the development team will partner with the city and the state to permanently daylight the Saw Mill River, transforming parts of Chicken Island and Larkin Plaza into one of the most unique and exciting public spaces in the entire country, a project that we just broke ground on in December.

But as bold and exciting and innovative as these plans are, as eager as this group was to invest more than a billion dollars in our downtown economy which has never seen that kind of investment, some people --- including some elected officials --- fooled themselves into thinking that, because these people were willing to invest here in Yonkers, we as a city could hold them hostage for unreasonable demands and over unnecessary delays.

Their flawed thinking was, "If these investors won't meet our demands on our timetable, we'll just find another set of investors who will."

It's this attitude that delayed final approval of the SFC project over four years. And now that it IS approved, just like Ridge Hill, it will be built in the middle of a recession.

My fellow residents, there is an important lesson to learn from these grave and consequential mistakes.

The willingness of national developers to come and invest billions of dollars in Yonkers was not an everyday occurrence. Those were unique opportunities, and in the cases of Ridge Hill and SFC, we almost completely squandered them.

The naysayers and antidevelopment crowd were wrong.

They had it backwards.

If we turn away willing investors with cumbersome demands and unreasonable delays, they will go somewhere else where they're welcomed with open arms and they will take their jobs and their revenues and their opportunities with them.

I truly am excited about opening Ridge Hill later this year. And I have every confidence that the SFC project will do everything we expect it will for our city. But I am also profoundly disappointed that we failed to act more quickly and seize on the great opportunities that were before us while the economy was still in good shape.

The hard lesson is that if Ridge Hill were open today, producing sales and income taxes on the conservative end of what we have estimated it will produce, and if SFC were under construction, we would not have had to lay off a single city worker over the past two years, nor would we have needed to raise the income tax surcharge, and we would be weathering the financial crisis in so much better shape than we are today.

As we begin to come out of this recession and look forward to better days ahead, we cannot afford to squander opportunities to improve our city when they present themselves. Pointless political bickering and indecision have cost us dearly in the past. In the future, let us not allow them to cost us even more.

Business Friendly City Government

Now, seizing opportunities for growth means attracting new investors and business into Yonkers, both large and small. In fact, small business employs more than two-thirds of our city's workforce. Recognizing that, our Office of Economic Development and our Industrial Development Agency have aggressively supported the small- and medium-sized businesses that drive our economy. Over the past eight years, we have helped more than 200 new businesses open their doors in Yonkers.

Of course, not all small businesses succeed. But we have made sure that hard working, enterprising business people with a good plan have every opportunity to succeed, and have the full support of their city government. Whether it's a planning department that works proactively with developers on revitalization projects, or building and engineering departments that respond quickly and efficiently, Yonkers city government is a solid partner for business.

The proof is in the dozens and dozens of new restaurants, new shoppes, new office buildings, and new professional spaces we've opened over the past eight years.

Now exciting new companies in the fields of computer science, biotech research and green energy are making their place of business right here in Yonkers.

Here in the audience today are business people from just a few of the many small- and medium-sized companies that have been started in the past few years by enterprising, hard working entrepreneurs. And, most importantly, all of them are employing Yonkers residents. So I want to thank all of our businesses for believing in Yonkers and for investing in our city.

Safer Neighborhoods & Historic Crime Reductions

The most important measure of any city's overall quality of life can be taken by asking a simple question: Is it safe? My fellow residents, the city of Yonkers is one of the safest big cities in the entire country, and the statistics prove it.

Over the past eight years, we've driven crime down 20%, and we're now ranked the second safest city in America by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report.

We've accomplished this by employing law enforcement strategies that have focused on preventing crime through five major areas: getting guns off the street, going after gangs, locking up drug dealers, addressing quality of life violations, and arresting people who are wanted on outstanding warrants. And we've made good progress on all five fronts.

As our police commissioner is fond of saying: "We never declare victory on crime." But that doesn't mean we can't take pause and recognize the remarkably successful efforts

made by the men and women of the Yonkers Police Department in making Yonkers one of America's safest cities.

Restoring Pride, Performance & Accountability to the Yonkers Public Schools

Any real estate agent can tell you, the question foremost in the minds of families who are deciding where they want to live, after of course "Is it safe?" ... is "How are the schools?"

So how are the schools?

Well it wasn't too long ago that many in Yonkers abandoned the idea that their children could get a quality education from the public schools in this city.

Racial tensions divided us. Hopes gave way to bitterness, and the public institutions of this city, most notably the Yonkers Public School System, were shaken to their core.

And sadly, things got worse over the course of many years, leading to more pessimism, regret and unfulfilled potential for many of our public school students.

But the difficult period of desegregation that started thirty years ago wasn't the end of the story. Over many years and through many struggles, we now know that it was really a new beginning. A new opportunity to do things better. And things have gotten a lot better.

There may be some who still look with a jaded eye upon the public school system we have worked so hard to restore. But that's because they haven't seen the promise blooming in our classrooms every day. Well, I have!

In just six short years, the Yonkers Public Schools have gone from graduating 51% of high school seniors to 87%, the biggest turnaround in the state. And when our students graduate, more of them are going on to college. 90% of last year's graduating class were accepted to college, the highest percentage of any big city school district in New York.

Our high school seniors are graduating smarter partly because they're being better educated at the primary level, and the test scores prove it. Yonkers fifth and eighth grade students are now testing at a rate more than 30% higher in English language arts than they did five years ago, and more than 50% higher in math.

And that's not all. Yonkers' prekindergarten program is nationally recognized for the job it does in preparing students at an early age for a good, solid education.

And we've done away with the middle school model entirely, moving back to the K-through-8 model that most of us grew up with because it just works better.

Then there are our high schools which have made the most marked improvement. When I came into office three of our high schools were on the state's list of failing schools, and two others were designated as "needing improvement." Today none of our schools are on the state's list of shame. In fact, we now have two of the best high schools in the entire country: Saunders and the International Baccalaureate Program at Yonkers High.

And to counter overcrowding and to prevent students from falling through the cracks, we opened four new high schools: the Riverside High School that prepares students for careers in the environmental sciences, the Early College High School where students begin college courses in the ninth grade, the Yonkers Montessori Academy which is the first pre-K-through-12 Montessori school in the country, and the Palisades Preparatory Academy that guarantees students by contract admittance to a two- or four-year college.

All of these efforts have led to a graduating class of high school seniors in Yonkers who last year earned a combined \$30 million worth of scholarships to colleges and universities all across America.

You know, the addition of these new schools is helping us accomplish another thing our residents have been waiting for, for a long time... The return to a neighborhood school system.

Now we're not there yet, and it will still take some time, but little by little the policies we have put in place are cutting down on busing and are making it easier for parents to send their children to school in their own neighborhoods.

The Yonkers business community has also become a key stakeholder in the Yonkers Public Schools. We've done this through innovative partnerships with local businesses arranged by the Yonkers Partners in Education. YPIE is a nonprofit organization that I founded in 2005 with a small, but motivated group of Yonkers business leaders.

Now, six years later, YPIE is a fully grown and active organization that is making a real difference in our schools.

I'll mention just two of the wonderful programs started and paid for by the local business community. The first is the SAT prep program that provides full private tutoring for any high school student who wants it, completely free of charge. The SAT prep program has boosted Yonkers students' scores on the exam by an average of two hundred points.

And the second is the college counseling service now provided, again free of charge, in our high schools, helping students choose and apply for colleges that are right for them. YPIE is doing great things in our schools and I want to thank the board members who are here with us today.

When you put all this together you have a formula for a truly good school system. And my fellow residents, that's what we have in Yonkers: really good schools.

With us tonight are some very special guests. Two high school seniors who will graduate with honors this year and have already gained early acceptance to represent our city at some very good universities in the fall.

From the new Riverside High School, Lindsey Ayanruoh, who will be attending the University of Pittsburgh on full academic scholarship.

And Nigel Munoz from Saunders High School, a full academic scholarship to Williams College and also a national Questbrige Scholar.

These students personify success for the Yonkers Public Schools. Success encouraged, enabled and fostered by the many efforts we have made to make our schools great once again. And we should acknowledge that student achievements like these would not be possible without the dedicated teachers who work with our students every day.

And we can be confident that the strides made in our school system will continue because we have the right people in charge. I am proud to say that the people entrusted with setting educational policy for our public schools --- the Board of Trustees --- are highly qualified, professional men and women from all backgrounds and walks of life. They are diverse, but united behind the common purpose of providing the children of Yonkers with a first-rate public education system, and they are doing a fantastic job.

And finally I have to mention the great work being done by our Superintendent Bernard Pierorazio as well. The successful reforms and remarkable gains in student achievement he has presided over helped him earn well deserved recognition as this year's "Superintendent of the Year" in New York State. Congratulations Bernard.

HOPE AND OPTIMISM FOR YONKERS' FUTURE

My fellow residents, together we have accomplished much over these past eight years that we can be proud of. There is no denying we have made Yonkers a safer, stronger and more vibrant city.

So here we are, on the verge of the next chapter in the history of our city. We know for certain that there is going to be a future, but what it's going to be depends on us. Our future doesn't have to be what we see around us today. We don't have to, nor should we settle for the progress already made. It's up to all of us to demand more.

The Threat of Personal Politics Over Public Purpose

You know, I never wanted to get into politics.

I am a professional engineer, and it was my job to help build up cities.

Early in my career I had the chance to work on the World Trade Center as it was being built, and on some other great public projects too.

I then went to work in White Plains and helped lay the foundation for that city's renaissance.

And one day I got a call asking if I would come to Yonkers and help begin the arduous task of rebuilding the city I grew up in and had seen fall into tough times. ...And I did, as deputy mayor for eight years, during which we made a lot of progress.

Then eight years ago, I was given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become the lead engineer on the project I care most about: making Yonkers a great city again.

And when I leave this office in a little more than ten months, and hand over the responsibility of leading this city, I can tell you from my experience there is one thing that threatens to keep us from actually becoming that great city: the dangerous cynicism created by people who put their own politics ahead of the public purpose.

As citizens, most especially those of us who are elected, we must always be mindful of our greater purpose to do the right thing for the people we serve and the community in which we live. But too often there are those put their ambitions and their politics ahead of their civic purpose. They misuse their public offices in a game of one-upmanship, abusing seriously important issues in a jockey run to improve their political positions. If you pay attention you'll know who they are; you see them on the news all the time. I can't tell you how many times I've been told, "Mayor, that was just politics," as they try to justify a blatantly political action that ran contrary to the best interests of our city, as if this were some sort of game --- a game that's played according to a single rule: putting politics ahead of the public purpose.

The danger is that putting politics over purpose allows cynical people in positions of power to rationalize all the things they do for their own personal gain.

Politics over purpose makes it possible for a small but vocal group of people who oppose everything to derail the progress of an entire city because the ones who shout the most get the most attention.

Politics over purpose allows some elected officials to place their personal agendas ahead of the people's agenda... It's been happening steadily more and more in this country because people feel powerless to stop it.

And politics over purpose is both the result of and the reason we have only 30% voter turnout in some elections.

My friends, politics over purpose has nearly destroyed this state, and if we are not careful, it could destroy Yonkers too.

Because governing is NOT a game. What we do here, the decisions we make, affect people's lives in very real and profound ways.

There is a stark difference between those who disagree honestly and intellectually and even emotionally, but still have the public's best interest at heart, and those who disagree solely for political reasons to posture and placate.

And it's up to we the people to distinguish between the two.

Believing In Yonkers & Fulfilling Our Promise

The cynics are not the majority of us. Most of us, the vast silent majority, believe in Yonkers' potential as a great city. We look around and see how far we've come and know there is much more yet we can accomplish.

Every day new people are moving into our city to be a part of this brighter, better future, because Yonkers is one of the few places in New York that's actually growing, alive with potential.

It is up to us, the believers, to make sure we live up to our potential. And if we resist those political forces who would derail us, if we keep focused on our goal to continue rebuilding Yonkers, then the path ahead will be clear.

Honest, open and accountable public institutions can and should deliver for the people. Aggressively growing our economy by attracting quality businesses and partnering with them will lead to more jobs and a better tomorrow.

And the quality of life of every resident in every neighborhood across the city can be improved by public servants who work for the people's benefit and not their own.

These principles have been forged out of a new doctrine for Yonkers: that settling for anything less than great is unacceptable for this city we have chosen to live in and to love.

Together we have built a better, stronger, safer foundation in Yonkers. But we won't stop at the foundation.

We will insist on greater progress because the people of Yonkers want to see their city move forward.

We will dream big dreams for our city because we believe in Yonkers' limitless potential. And even though there are difficult times before us, we will overcome them because we will not give up on our vision for Yonkers.

We will inspire ourselves and each other with confidence in our purpose because we know that, together, we can get there.

And we will not do these things in the name of any one person, one cause, or one administration.

We will do these things --- we will believe in each other --- because it's the right thing to do for Yonkers.

Thank you. And God bless our great city.